Classic Film Review: Night of the Living Dead Will Scare the Hell Out of Every Generation

Fifty years ago, the late George A. Romero delivered a nightmare that hasn't ended

BY MICHAEL ROFFMAN ON SEPTEMBER 29, 2018, 11:00PM

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Not to state the obvious, but *Night of the Living Dead* is a timeless nightmare on celluloid. Ever since its October 1st, 1968, debut, George A. Romero's 1968 cult classic has been haunting American audiences of all ages. Sure, there's the whole conceit that it tipped off the now-lucrative (and also now-tiresome) zombie genre, but there's more behind the ghouls, the explicit gore, or even the subtle social commentary. Commentary that Romero had denied repeatedly for decades, but commentary that was no doubt inspired by the ongoing Civil Rights movement that paralleled much of the chaos the ensemble cast describes and recounts throughout the film's horrifying 96 minutes.

No, the true horror of Romero's black-and-white, $114,000 epic is how insufferably suffocating it all feels, a fever dream that starts and doesn't let up until that devastating final shot to Duane Jones. Even then, Romero doesn't stop squeezing your neck, flooding the screen with the macabre aftermath, where bodies upon bodies are stacked in concentrated piles, drawing eerie parallels to historical World War II footage coming out of Auschwitz or Dachau. And that music! Those eerie, loopy sounds, culled from various TV programs and B-movies, ranging from *Ben Casey* to *Teenagers from Outer Space* to *The Devil's Messenger*, only adds to the surrealism and feeling that it's all a dream.

That lingering feeling stems from the film's would-be protagonist, Barbara (Judith O'Dea), whose dreamy introduction is one of the more curious setups of any horror movie. But really, it's the simplicity that's so staggering: She and her brother — the deliciously cynical Johnny (Russell Streiner) — are visiting their family plot at a far-off cemetery. On paper, that sounds incredibly rudimentary, especially since this is a movie about the living dead, but it's

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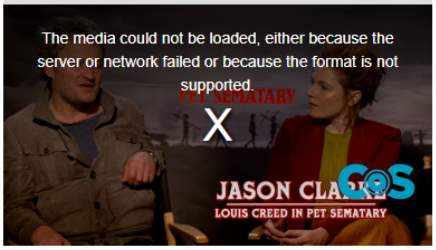
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sounds incredibly rudimentary, especially since this is a movie about the living dead, but it's the little details that Romero welds into the narrative that really affect the subconscious and play into dream logic. Like, for instance, the fact that it's so late in the evening or that Barbara must willfully leave her injured brother upon the first attack.

[**Read**: Growing Up in the Land of the Living Dead]

By this point, audiences aren't left with a protagonist so much as a victim, whose own anxieties have been exacerbated to the point that she's become mildly delusional. It's a very alarming feeling and one that Romero uses to his advantage, reveling in the convenience of keyless cars, wide-open fields, or empty farm houses. It's like one of those stress dreams we all have from time to time, when we silently scream to ourselves, "Why am I here? What am I doing? Where do I go? Why can't I wake up?" Because this wouldn't be much of a movie just following Barbara, the tone shifts considerably upon the arrival of Jones, whose heroic Ben adds a sense of balance and hope.

But not much. The brilliant difference between *Night* and, well, any other zombie narrative, even its 1978 spiritual sequel, *Dawn of the Dead*, is that this isn't a film about hope — this is a film about loss. From beginning to end, any sense of hope is so often thwarted by one or several hiccups. There's gas! There's a truck! There's a gun! All of which lead to death, death, and death. Despite his best efforts — and they are quite incredible — Ben's salient choices are so often met with disappointing results, mostly at the will of others, and Romero only draws the walls in closer and closer with each fumble. So that by the end, our fallen hero is left alone, pitted hopelessly in a basement, surrounded by defeat.

Even so, Ben never gives up. He keeps fighting for survival, which some might argue is enough to call this film hopeful, but it's really not. After all, Ben isn't killed by his own faults, or even by the monsters surrounding the house, seemingly drifting in from an unthinkable dark abyss. No, he's killed by The Man, which is inarguably why this film will always be a lucrative source of American social commentary. His death, however, doesn't just feed into historical parallels, but once again, the idea that, like any dream or nightmare, there is no control. There's only the inescapable witness: Barbara. Ben. The vitriolic father. His exhausted wife. The star-crossed couple. But really, you.

It must have been something to be in theaters when *Night of the Living Dead* first premiered. Even today, the sheer horror in every frame and sequence goes above and beyond what American audiences are traditionally given. Because, while movies have certainly become more grotesque, capitalizing on the Tom Savinis, the Stan Winstons, the million-dollar hard drives that conjure up mediocre gore, very few are ever this visceral, unforgiving, or subtle. This is the great American nightmare, in which neither families, friends, neighbors, nor lovers can save you, and no matter what you try and no matter where you go, it won't stop until you do. There is nothing more terrifying than that.

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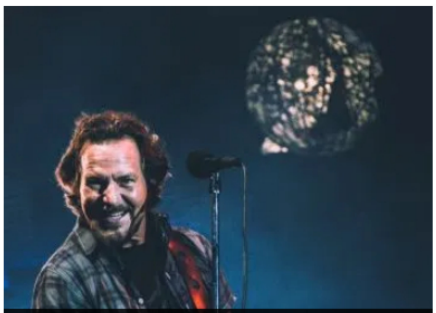

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